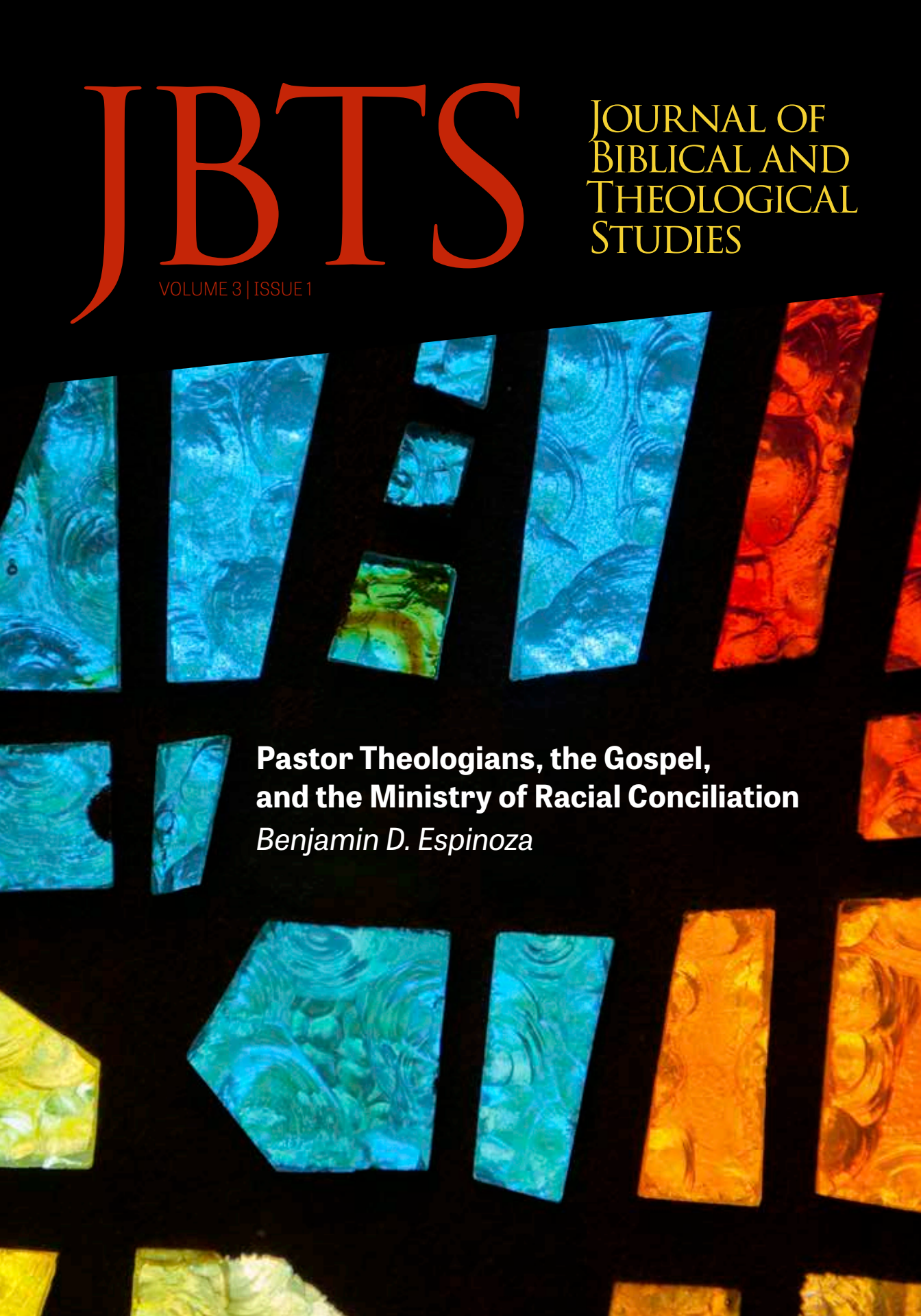


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**Pastor Theologians, the Gospel,  
and the Ministry of Racial Conciliation**

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## ***Pastor Theologians, The Gospel, and the Ministry of Racial Conciliation***

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**Abstract:** Evangelicalism has a historically tenuous relationship with racial conciliation. As our nation becomes increasingly diverse, we must rethink our approaches to racial conciliation. The purpose of this article is to give pastor theologians a vision and plan for developing a rich ministry of racial conciliation. The paper will situate racial conciliation as a gospel issue that demands a response. Next, the article will explore how scholars have reflected on the source, nature, and solutions to racism. Finally, I develop key practices and implications that will assist pastor theologians in being agents of racial conciliation in both ecclesial and academic spaces.

**Key Words:** Race, evangelicalism, pastor theologian, racial conciliation, social justice, gospel

### **Introduction**

The evangelical church has a mixed record on racial conciliation. While many evangelicals in the 1800's fought alongside William Wilberforce and John Wesley in the abolition of slavery, others such as George Whitefield embraced the practice.<sup>1</sup> Whitefield nuanced his perspective by treating his slaves with dignity and respect, but still accepted slavery as common practice. But ultimately, those who fought to protect the institution of slavery were defeated, and evangelicalism has since looked upon its history with shame. Fast forward to the civil rights movement of the 1960's, many evangelicals partnered with Martin Luther King, Jr. and others to protest the unjust treatment of African-Americans in the United States. For instance, Rev. Ashton Jones, a White pastor, was incarcerated for six months for leading an

1. Jessica M. Parr, *Inventing George Whitefield: Race, Revivalism, and the Making of a Religious Icon* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2015); Edward J. Cashin, *Beloved Bethesda: A History of George Whitefield's Home for Boys, 1740–2000* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2001).

interracial group of protestors to the First Baptist Church of Atlanta. In Jones' words, "You're going into a segregated church; you must be worshipping a segregated God."<sup>2</sup> But other evangelicals, such as W.A. Criswell and Jerry Falwell considered racial integration to do more harm than good.<sup>3</sup> As the struggle for civil rights pressed on, many evangelicals slowly accepted the new order.

In examining the situation today, we find that evangelicals tend to hold racial and ethnic views that fail to understand the complexity of racial oppression. In their landmark study recounted in the book *Divided by Faith*, Emerson and Smith interviewed over 2,000 white evangelicals on how they perceive racial issues in the United States.<sup>4</sup> The study revealed that white evangelicals often do not acknowledge systemic racism or white privilege. "Most white evangelicals, directed by their cultural tools, fail to recognize the institutionalization of racism - in economic, political, educational, social, and religious systems. They therefore often think and act as if these problems do not exist."<sup>5</sup> In other words, White evangelicals tend to assume that ethnic communities fail to "succeed" due to some deficiency in their motivation or within their culture. White evangelicals would rather society was color-blind. As Emerson and Smith note, "From the isolated, individualistic perspective of most white evangelicals and many other Americans, there really is no race problem other than bad interpersonal relationships."<sup>6</sup> The failure of White evangelicals to recognize the plight of racially minoritized groups has continued to perpetuate the assertion of MLK: Sunday morning at 11am is the most segregated hour in the nation.

As an evangelical *Chicano* (Mexican-American) and pastor theologian, I grew concerned with how evangelicalism was handling race relations. In Summer 2017, I conducted a study into the experiences of racially minoritized doctoral students in evangelical seminaries across the United States. My motivation behind this project was to explore how racially minoritized students were doing in predominantly White theological institutions. My own experience in seminary was fruitful and I learned plenty from my professors. But I saw that many of my fellow brothers and sisters of color were struggling during their time there. I wanted to understand their experiences so I could speak truth to the institutions whose goal is to train men and women for ministry in our world today. While I primarily asked my participants questions about their experiences in seminary, I ended with a question about how pastors and ministry leaders could better engage in the ministry of racial conciliation. I will include some of their answers in this paper.

2. Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 165.

3. *Ibid.*, 170.

4. Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

5. *Ibid.*, 170.

6. *Ibid.*, 89.

The purpose of my paper is to help pastor theologians develop a better grasp on the ministry of racial conciliation. I want to highlight the work of evangelical theologians who have grappled with racial conciliation, and how we better seek conciliation through the power of the gospel. I then move to engage with the work of George Yancey, whose thoughts on racism and racial conciliation serve as a guide for moving toward a stronger ministry of racial conciliation. Finally, I develop some implications to assist pastor theologians to build a stronger ministry of racial conciliation in their local contexts.

## **Definitions**

Before I begin, I would like to offer several working definitions of terms I will use throughout this paper. I understand the ministry of the pastor theologian to be different than that of a pastor. The pastor theologian has:

A shepherd's heart and a pastor's primary vocational identity, yet who functions as an intellectual peer of the academic theologian and, as such, produces theological scholarship for the broader ecclesial community that helps shape and inform academic, cultural, and ecclesial discussions with a view to deepening the faith of the people of God.<sup>7</sup>

The pastor theologian thus functions in the third space between being a steward of Christ's church, but engaging theological discussion in the local church, the universal church, and the academy.

The terms "race" and "ethnicity"<sup>8</sup> are well-defined in the literature, but in sum, I resonate with Syed and Mitchell's definitions of these terms. "Race is considered a socially constructed system of power that confers dominance on the majority and marginalization on the minority. In contrast, ethnicity corresponds to the cultural history, beliefs, and practices of a relatively well-defined group."<sup>9</sup> Race and ethnicity are often linked though they are not exactly the same, as Syed and Mitchell point out.

## **Racial Conciliation and the Gospel**

Is racial conciliation a "gospel issue?" This is question is crucial for pastor theologians seeking to bring theology to bear on pastoral ministry. Some have made

7. Gerald Hiestand and Todd Wilson, *The Pastor Theologian, Resurrecting an Ancient Vision* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 16.

8. For further discussion on race and ethnicity, see Janell Williams Paris, "Race: Critical Thinking and Transformative Possibilities," 9–32; and Eloise Hiebert Meneses, "Science and the Myth of Biological Race," 33–46. in Robert J. Priest and Alvaro L. Nieves, *This Side of Heaven Race, Ethnicity, and Christian Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

9. Moin Syed and Laura L. Mitchell, "How Race and Ethnicity Shape Emerging Adulthood," in *The Oxford Handbook of Emerging Adulthood*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

the distinction between “gospel issues” and “social justice issues,”<sup>10</sup> while many evangelical theologians have made the case that the gospel and racial conciliation go hand in hand.

Gombis writes that traditional evangelicalism has removed the gospel from its corporate and cosmic dimensions.<sup>11</sup> As we read in Genesis, sin has broken all relationships: our relationship with God, our relationship with each other, and our relationship with creation. “Whereas all aspects of creation and God’s relationship to creation were fully integrated and characterized by trust and openness and full sharing and fellowship, things are now utterly broken, and sin is carried out within broken relationships...So even before we’re out of Genesis, we have murder, incest, rape, racial strife, the enslavement of nations, and on and on.”<sup>12</sup> The gospel is thus a project of conciliation, restoring and redeeming broken relationships into wholly new ones.

Gombis’ understanding of the gospel applies to racial conciliation. He argues that the thrust of the gospel is both individual and social, as Jesus “came proclaiming the arrival of the kingdom of God—the arrival of that new reality in which the brokenness of creation is being restored,” a byproduct being racial conciliation.<sup>13</sup> This ministry of racial conciliation is central to the ministry of Jesus:

He is constantly going to the outsider and to the ones who are broken, always challenging the social, ethnic, and racial assumptions of Israel—the Syrophenician woman, the Samaritan, the centurion, the tax-collector, the prostitute, his invitation of women into his inner circle. Jesus’ disciples, because they are sinful humans, are always wanting to draw lines around their privilege with Jesus, just as the Jews wanted to view themselves as having the inside track with God, excluding others, especially those despicable Gentiles. But Jesus announces the arrival of the kingdom to all people, and calls everyone to receive salvation, and calls his disciples to be servants of all—especially outsiders. And this should not be a threat to us, since before the grace of God invaded our lives, we too were outsiders!<sup>14</sup>

The ministry of Jesus becomes more complex when we consider the social location of the Nazarene. Otis Moss III writes that in order to understand the ministry of Jesus, we need to understand His place in the first-century world—as a racial,

10. Randy White, “I Don’t Understand the Evangelical Response to Ferguson,” Retrieved October 15, 2017, from <http://www.randywhiteministries.org/2014/11/26/dont-understand-evangelical-response-ferguson/>. White goes as far as to say, “If there is something Biblical that expresses racial reconciliation as a gospel demand, I’ve missed it.”

11. Timothy Gombis, “Racial Conciliation and the Gospel,” *ACT Review* (2006), 117–128.

12. *Ibid.*, 119.

13. *Ibid.*, 120.

14. *Ibid.*, 120.

ethnic, and religious minority.<sup>15</sup> Thus, while it is our tendency in the United States to suggest that Jesus “reached out” to those on the social and religious margins, we fail to realize that Christ Himself was on the margins. This re-centering of Jesus’ ministry on the margins based on historical context radically shapes the way we read Scripture and our approach to ministry; reading Scripture on the margins enables us to challenge our assumptions, better understand the perspectives of others, and expand our theological imaginations.

Like Gombis, D.A. Carson suggests that the gospel is intricately tied to the project of racial conciliation. To seek racial conciliation is not simply a “nice thing to do,” but is rooted rather in Christ’s redemptive work on the cross and in Paul’s effort to build multiethnic, multicultural churches:

Certainly the majority of Christians in America today would happily aver that good race relations are a gospel issue. They might point out that God’s saving purpose is to draw to himself, through the cross, men and women from every tongue and tribe and people and nation; that the church is one new humanity, made up of Jew and Gentile; that Paul tells Philemon to treat his slave Onesimus as his brother, as the apostle himself; that this trajectory starts at creation, with all men and women being made in the image of God, and finds its anticipation in the promise to Abraham that in his seed all the nations of the earth will be blessed. Moreover, the salvation secured by Christ in the gospel is more comprehensive than justification alone: it brings repentance, wholeness, love for brothers and sisters in the Christian community. But the sad fact remains that not all Christians have always viewed race relations within the church as a gospel issue.<sup>16</sup>

Carson goes on to say that White evangelicals and evangelicals of color continue to see both sides of the question differently. Whereas Christians of colors would contend that racial conciliation is a crucial gospel issue, White Christians are “more likely to imagine that racial issues have so largely been resolved that it is a distraction to keep bringing them up.”<sup>17</sup>

Timothy Cho eloquently ties the gospel to racial conciliation, articulating a vision of the gospel that actively confronts the sin of racism:

Racism, ethnocentricity, and racial superiority are clearly not simply “social issues” that Christians can ignore. They are ideologies that seek to attack the gospel at its core. It is in the best interest of Christians to respond to these anti-gospel ideas with a robust picture of the gospel—a gospel that claims that

15. Otis Moss III, *Blue-Note Preaching in a Post-Soul World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2014).

16. D.A. Carson, “What are Gospel Issues?” *Themelios* 39 (2): 217–218

17. *Ibid.*, 218.

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all people are equally guilty before a holy God but who can be recipients of grace if they trust in Christ.<sup>18</sup>

Racism is thus an affront to the grace of God and a confirmation of our inherent sin nature. While it is within our DNA to assume a posture of superiority to others, society has actively perpetuated systemic racism.<sup>19</sup> As Christians, we must name and confront individual and systemic racism by critical examination of our own hearts and advocacy for a more equitable society.

Furthermore, we can ground the project of racial conciliation in the Triune nature of God. Catherine LaCugna describes how inclusiveness, community, and freedom come together to form a powerful rationale for racial conciliation:

Inclusiveness entails accepting a person in light of our own common humanity. Community points to interrelatedness at every level of reality, and contradicts those forces destructive to genuine community, especially sexism and racism. Freedom and its corollary, responsibility, belong to the exercise of personhood under conditions of genuine community. Perichoresis ... is thus the 'form of life' for God and the ideal of human beings whose communion with each other reflects the life of the Trinity.<sup>20</sup>

Our common life in the Triune God and our God-bearing image instills within us a desire to seek conciliation with others. The project of racial conciliation thus flows out of our union with God in Christ, transforming our souls and the communities we inhabit. Ultimately, the gospel is the means by which God has chosen to reconcile Himself to us and others; the gospel is what brings true inclusiveness, community, and freedom.

The gospel is a call to conciliation with both God, fellow humans, and creation. One aspect of the gospel project is racial conciliation. The church thus carries the responsibility to actively seek racial conciliation, and pastor theologians bear "the primary responsibility of overseeing local performances" of the gospel.<sup>21</sup>

18. Timothy Isaiah Cho, "Is Racism a Social Issue or a Gospel Issue?" Retrieved October 20, 2017 from

[https://cccdiscover.com/is-racism-a-social-issue-or-a-gospel-issue/?utm\\_content=bufferd4411&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=facebook.com&utm\\_campaign=buffer](https://cccdiscover.com/is-racism-a-social-issue-or-a-gospel-issue/?utm_content=bufferd4411&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=buffer)

19. George Yancey, *Beyond Racial Gridlock: Embracing Mutual Responsibility* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006); Emerson & Smith, *Divided by Faith*.

20. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991), 272–273.

21. Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 448.

## **Racial Conciliation in Thought and Practice**

If racial conciliation is a gospel issue, how do we confront the sin of racism? Many thoughtful Christians continue to wrestle with the issue and those of differing opinions and viewpoints continue to talk past one another. This is because several perspectives on racial issues and conciliation exist within Christendom. Guided by the work of George Yancey, I will outline several responses and approaches to racial conciliation in the church. Yancey's approaches help us understand the pervasiveness of racism, as well as the tremendous responsibility the church bears in promoting a ministry of racial conciliation.

### **Individualist Definition of Racism**

According to Yancey, an individualist definition of racism asserts that racism is "something overt that can be done only by one individual to another."<sup>22</sup> This definition assumes that individuals have complete autonomy over their actions, and possess the capacity to choose between right and wrong. The problems that ail society stem from the sins of the individual. This perspective extends to our understanding of specific instances of racism in our society. If a White police officer kills an unarmed Black man, or a White apartment manager denies housing to a Latina, then those people are racists. However, to say that these individual episodes are representative of an entire system is a stretch, according to the individualist definition. Yancey, citing the work of Emerson and Smith, writes that White evangelicals are more likely to accept the individualist definition because their concept of personal sin is so strong.<sup>23</sup> The perspective also leads some to suggest that since families in the Black community are less likely to remain together than White families, then the onus of blame lies on the sins of Black families.<sup>24</sup> The solution to racism in this definition is to help individuals examine the racist tendencies of their own heart and seek forgiveness from Jesus Christ.

### **Systemic Definition of Racism**

In contrast to the individualist definition, the structuralist definition asserts that society as a whole can perpetuate racism, even when individuals choose not to be racist.<sup>25</sup> "People do not merely make personal choices; they make choices influenced by the structures of their society."<sup>26</sup> As Yancey points out, Black and Latino youth tend to fall behind their White counterparts academically. For structuralists, the

22. George Yancey, *Beyond Racial Gridlock*, 20.

23. *Ibid.*, 21.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*, 22.

26. *Ibid.*



problem is not that Black and Latino youth are incapable of flourishing academically; the problem is that their schools are not as well-funded as the schools of their White counterparts. Whereas those who embrace an individualist definition of racism may attribute the issue to individual ability, work ethic, or cultural differences.

### **Four Secular Responses to Racial Conciliation**

Yancey describes four secular responses to racial conciliation while promoting a model he calls Christian mutual responsibility.<sup>27</sup> The first response to racial conciliation is *colorblindness*. This model asserts that in order for society to progress in race relations, all of us must move beyond seeing the color of one another's skin and view one another as equals. While this response is laudable, its ignorance of "racial issues can spread to ignorance of the pain of minority group members and the need for race-specific solutions."<sup>28</sup> The second response is *Anglo-conformity*. This response argues that in order to see peace and success in one's life, minorities should adopt the cultural values and rhythms of White people. The problem with this perspective is that it "projects an image of Eurocentrist arrogance, as it offers only European American methods of economic empowerment."<sup>29</sup> Moreover, the model assumes that because White Christians are in the majority, their success and adherence to biblical values must be linked. The third response is *multiculturalism*. This perspective recognizes the value that other cultures bring, and our need to ensure that all perspectives are heard. The trouble with this model is two-fold, 1) like the colorblindness model, this perspective tends to ignore the histories of minoritized populations, and 2) devolves into cultural relativism, asserting that all cultures possess truth, and to critique other cultures amounts to cultural superiority. The final response is *majority blaming*. This perspective, prominent in mainline denominations, asserts that the White population is to blame for the problems of minoritized groups. Of course, predominantly White Christians were to blame for slavery and segregation; there is little grappling with this fact.

However, this perspective acquits minoritized groups of critically examining the problems of their own communities, and does not necessarily propose helpful solutions.

### **Christian Mutual Responsibility**

In contrast to the secular responses to racial conciliation, Yancey proposes a model of mutual responsibility, where we acknowledge individual and systemic forms racism and work together to seek solutions to race-based problems. This position

27. *Ibid.*, 39.

28. *Ibid.*, 40.

29. *Ibid.*, 52.

recognizes that racism is an issue of the heart and of the system. The pervasiveness of racism requires the church to attack this sin on all fronts. Moreover, instead of adopting hostile approaches to engaging the ministry of racial conciliation, this model prescribes conversation between Whites and racially and ethnically minoritized groups. In essence, all parties must come together to envision a future for the church that no longer tolerates racism in any form.

### **The Pastor Theologian and Racial Conciliation**

Thus far, we have thought together about how the gospel demands the ministry of racial conciliation, how we conceptualize racism, and how we combat racism. If we believe that racial conciliation and multiethnic ministry are gospel-laden concerns, how do we operationalize these truths into our minds, hearts, and ministries? Now we turn to the pastor theologian's role in developing a ministry of racial conciliation. As mentioned previously, the pastor theologian's role is two-fold, 1) to shepherd the people of God, and 2) to contribute to broader theological discourse. The pastor theologian's role in the ministry of racial conciliation goes beyond simply diversifying church bodies and leadership teams. The pastor theologian, who lives in the liminal space between ecclesial and academic culture, can contribute to broader theological discourse that addresses racial conciliation. In this section, I imagine ways in which pastor theologians can succeed in developing a race-conscious approach to ministry and theological conversations while serving in a leadership role in the church.

As I mentioned previously, I conducted a study on several students of color at a number of evangelical seminaries in the United States. While I was specifically focused on their experiences as students of color in predominantly White spaces, I asked them 2–3 questions regarding how the church can better handle racial issues in a gospel-centered way. Several of the proposals I have listed here stem from my conversations with these individuals.

### **Reading Theology from People of Color**

In many of our colleges and seminaries in the United States, many of our textbooks are written by white males. Case in point, a recent article in the *Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society*, the academic resource in the theory and practice of evangelical preaching, found that out of the top twenty preaching books used in evangelical, mainline, Catholic, and Orthodox seminaries in the United States, two were written by women, and one written by a non-American (John Stott). The rest were written by white American males.<sup>30</sup> In another case, the “recommended reading” list of a well-known seminary includes many of the Christian classics with very few contemporary

30. Troy Borst, “Homiletical Textbook Study: What Are Seminaries Across Traditions Using to Teach the Next Generation of Preachers?” *Evangelical Homiletics Society* 15.2. (2015): 38–49.

works written from non-persons of color. While this may not inherently be wrong, it does assume that exegesis and theology from the perspective of a White person is “neutral” or “objective” or even “normal.” Such an assumption fails to account for the fact the perspective of white men is simply that—a *perspective*. Several of my participants noted that most of the textbooks they had read in seminary were written by white men, and some asked their professors if they could read a book written by a person of color instead (the professors were always happy to oblige).

As the United States continues to grow more and more diverse, and evangelicalism continues the same trend,<sup>31</sup> it is imperative that pastor theologians engage and embrace the theological perspectives of persons of color. The work of James Cone in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* provides a useful starting point in engaging with, and understanding the perspective of Christians of color.<sup>32</sup> For Cone, matters of racial conciliation are inherently gospel issues and thus impact our broader witness to the world. “What is at stake is the credibility and promise of the Christian gospel and the hope that we may heal the wounds of racial violence that continue to divide our churches and our society.”<sup>33</sup> For Cone, the cross of Christ and the lynching trees adorned with Black bodies have vivid connections. Jesus was a racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious minority in the Roman empire, much like Black slaves were during the time of slavery, and people of color continue to be in society. The comparison of the cross to the lynching tree is a stark reminder of the ways in which people of power in society have always sought to oppress those with less power. For early Christians (who were generally poor and Jewish), the Romans and the Jewish religious elite were the oppressors. White Christians used their social and economic power to oppress black Christians. Conceptualizing race relations as being rooted in the cross of Christ enables us to center the experiences of marginalized peoples and seek racial conciliation rooted in the gospel of Christ.

Reading theology from non-white perspectives will no doubt challenge the thought of pastor theologians, especially as they confront systemic injustices, privilege, and a different perspective on the gospel. But in order to fully embrace the riches of the Christian tradition, we must not only explore the historic works of the faith, but also the work of those whose perspective is deeply rooted in a history of oppression. Engaging the work of theologians of color will enable us to bring a more conscious perspective to our theological work, and broaden the ways in which we speak into current events from a theological perspective.

31. Mark T. Mulder, Aida I. Ramos, and Gerardo Marti, *Latino Protestantism: Growing and Diverse* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

32. James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013).

33. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*.

## **Including Leaders of Color**

Many churches across the United States seek to embody the rich, multiethnic, diverse Kingdom of God. However, church leaders often fall short of their mission because they fail to place minoritized individuals in places of authority in the church. One former student who is now working as a denominational associate in the Southeast told me that in his perspective, many churches often tokenize their members of color while failing to include them in leadership positions:

But I think that churches have to intentionally go after minorities. I think the perspective is they will come to us. We have enough minorities in the church with diversify, bring leadership and position to minister to reach out. What I suggest to pastors is you need to start establishing relationship with minorities and understand, walk in their shoes, so to speak, understand where they are coming from. And you don't want a minority as a token. You know, we have an African American family or Hispanic family but bring those guys, put them in the front and in position of leadership that a community can see that you value, you know, what they can contribute, what they do and that will draw other minorities in.<sup>34</sup>

For some churches, “diversity” simply means welcoming people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds into fellowship. However, diversity is not the same as inclusion. To include racial and ethnic minorities in leadership positions, including as pastors, committee members, worship leaders, and teachers, is the expression of true diversity in the body of Christ. This inclusion cannot mean assimilation into dominant ecclesial cultural values, however.

One of the participants in my study, Christi, a Black woman, said that while we all belong to the body of Christ, it is important that we acknowledge our histories and experiences:

I think the biggest thing that the church can do is appreciating each person's background, appreciating their ethnicity and everything that their ethnicity brings to the table. I know that there is a big push in Christendom for racial conciliation. And I very much support that but in a lot of cases, it's racial conciliation from the point of, well, we see no color. You know, love sees no color. We're all a part of God's family. And yes, we are. We're all part of God's family but I think it's important to see color because when someone looks at me, I think the fact that they see, if they see that I am an African American or Black woman, there are certain things that come with that, certain experiences that I think people need to have an appreciation and an understanding for.<sup>35</sup>

34. Joaquin, interview by author, Zoom video software, June 15, 2017.

35. Christi, interview by author, Zoom Video Software June 20, 2017.

Pastor theologians must remain sensitive to the ways in which the ecclesial culture they have perpetuated has become normalized and neutral, privileging dominant cultural values over those of racial and ethnic minorities. For instance, styles of music, attire, preaching and teaching styles, service activities, and even theological viewpoints may be the dominant preferences of those in the church. But we must remain self-reflective, and ask if these preferences are marginalizing people from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.

## **Listening and Responding Well**

During instances of racial tensions in our society, it becomes easy for Christians to listen to those who confirm their own viewpoint on the issue. In an article from the *Washington Post*, Michael Frost described how Christians were divided into two camps, represented by quarterbacks Colin Kaepernick and Tim Tebow. While Tim Tebow represented White Christians and their pro-life stance, commitment to sexual ethics, prayer in public schools, and evangelism, Kaepernick represented Christians of color focused on the plight of the oppressed, social justice, police violence, and giving to the poor.<sup>36</sup> Tensions between these two camps reached a fever pitch when several NFL teams bent the knee during the singing of the national anthem. Some Christians argued that NFL players were protesting the mistreatment and murder of young Black men by police, while others argued that to take the knee is disrespectful to the flag and those veterans who died preserving our freedoms. In a sense, both sides were talking past each other, and unwilling to hear the perspectives of the other. “The bifurcation of contemporary Christianity into two distinct branches is leaving the church all the poorer, with each side needing to be enriched by the biblical vision of the other.”<sup>37</sup> However, it was primarily White Christians who protested the NFL players’ protests, while Christians of color voiced their support for the kneeling NFL players. One of the participants I interviewed, a Black woman, described the need for listening to communities of color during times of racial tension in our society. “Listen. Just listen. Just shut up. Show up. Listen.”

Pastor theologians bear the responsibility of leading congregations into the practice of listening. Listening to others forces us to take off our cultural blinders for a second, acknowledge the humanity of others, and for a moment, enter into their experiences with them. Proverbs speaks multitudes of this practice of listening. Proverbs 1:5 implores the wise to “hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance.” Proverbs 19:20 implores the wise to “listen to advice and accept instruction” in order to “gain wisdom in the future.” Moreover, when Job’s friends came to him during his time of immense loss and spiritual struggle,

36. Michael Frost, “Colin Kaepernick vs. Tim Tebow: A Tale of Two Christians on Their Knees,” Retrieved October 25, 2017 from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/09/24/colin-kaepernick-vs-tim-tebow-a-tale-of-two-christianities-on-its-knees/?utm\\_term=.4543895677a4](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/09/24/colin-kaepernick-vs-tim-tebow-a-tale-of-two-christianities-on-its-knees/?utm_term=.4543895677a4)

37. Ibid.

they sat with him for a week in silence (Job 2:3). It is imperative that as our brothers and sisters of color struggle and experience the pain of deep historical wounds, we as pastor theologians must grieve with them, be with them in their hurt, and listening to their concerns.

When we as pastor theologians write a theological piece for the benefit of the church, we must make sure that we are conscious of the diverse histories that our audiences share. While some pastor theologians may never have experienced racism or systemic oppression, it is our responsibility to be quick to listen and slow to speak. In our society, however, Christians expect their pastors to express a particular viewpoint regarding current events, but pastor theologians must empower their parishioners to listen better and understand the viewpoints of others.

### **Conclusion**

Racial conciliation is challenging but worth the effort. To become the multicultural, multiethnic body of Christ, we must be intentional with our words and with our actions. To be effective pastor theologians who lead churches that become centers of racial conciliation and theologically advocate for the perspective of the marginalized, we must be quick to listen, slow to respond, eager to include, and hopeful for change. Ultimately, the project of racial conciliation is a gospel matter of which the church and her pastor theologians must continually engage. The world is watching us as we respond to race-based atrocities in our nation, awaiting our response, and looking to us for a word of encouragement. As Gombis writes, “conciliation is the gospel, and racial, or ethnic conciliation—in a divided America, and in a divided world—provides a perfect arena to manifest and to live out the reconciling grace of God.”<sup>38</sup>

38. Gombis, “Racial Conciliation and the Gospel,” 117.